Theatre arts in 2008: *Agamemnon* at Oxford

Claire Catenaccio

In the autumn of 1880, Oxford undergraduate Frank Benson put on a performance of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* in Ancient Greek in the Hall of Balliol College. For Frank it proved the start of a glorious stage-career that culminated in a knighthood. This October, 128 years later, the Oxford University Classical Drama Society brings this same powerful drama to the stage. Claire Catenaccio explains some of the decisions that today's director has to take.

Agamemnon tells the story of the Argive king's return from Troy, and his murder at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra. The death of Agamemnon is the epicentre of the play. From here fault-lines of consequence radiate in every direction, back in time to the princess Iphigenia, long since sacrificed for the Greek cause, as well as breaking up the lives of Agamemnon, of Clytemnestra, and of the Trojan prophetess Cassandra, brought from her home as a war-captive by Agamemnon.

The earthquake rumbles most strongly in the central scene of the play where Agamemnon enters his palace by walking across a long swath of crimson cloth, which his wife has laid down to celebrate his triumphant return. He hesitates; she insists; he complies. This seemingly simple act seals his doom, as the carpet beneath his feet becomes a symbolic river of blood, sweeping him inexorably to his death. Throughout the play ambiguity and double entendre, dark prophecy and deceptive hope create an atmosphere of paranoia and uncertainty. The moody, evocative choral songs join with the elaborate rhetoric of the episodes to create a stark vision of violence and revenge.

If this all sounds larger than life, it is. Aeschylus works on a grand scale: his lyrics look both behind and ahead of the development of the present action, absorbed in the working out of a trilogy, of which *Agamemnon* is only the first part. Throughout the trilogy, crime generates counter-crime, until at last this murderous circle is broken by the intervention of Athena at the end of the *Eumenides*. But for the *Agamemnon* this final renunciation of violence is far in the future. Performed on its own, *Agamemnon* is a deep-set gem, glowing blood-red.

Coping with a chorus

The concentrated fury of the plot is only the first challenge for a director. Tragedy in the fifth century was formally much more diverse than most modern drama. In the *Agamemnon* the chorus performs five self-contained sequences of song and dance, each of which marks a break of some kind in the action of the plot. At the other end of the spectrum from the choral passages are the scenes or episodes, mostly made up of speeches and dialogues in longer, balanced lines.

These spoken choral passages can take several forms: an extended, descriptive speech, as when the Herald reports the shipwreck that ruined the fleet of Menelaus; a heated line-for-line exchange between two characters, as when Clytemnestra persuades Agamemnon to enter his palace on the crimson carpet; or a formal debate or *agon*, as when Clytemnestra defends her actions to the horror-struck old men of the Chorus.

Aeschylus sometimes puts choral song and spoken discourse together, as when the doomed prophetess Cassandra sings her virtuoso arias to the bewildered and frightened Chorus, who at first can only answer her in plain speech, until their own passion catches fire. Here it is the dissonance between song and speech that heightens the emotive impact.

Managing masks

If form and music are difficult to handle, there is also the question of how to make masked drama work. Various explanations have been put forward to explain why the Greeks used masks, ranging from the ritualistic to the extremely practical. Certainly practical concerns played a part: masks provided clear, visual cues about character in a vast outdoor performance space, and allowed the playwright to create a multiplicity of *dramatis personae* from a small, set number of actors.

Whatever practical and traditional reasons lay behind the Greek use of masks in their plays, the fundamental issue remains how the art of masked drama worked as a coherent whole. In masked tragedy every element must respond to every other element. Seeing Greek drama played unmasked is in this sense like *reading* Greek drama, or looking at statues that have lost their colour: we encounter a marvellous fragment, a once essential element plucked out of its context by the historical accidents of textual survival, and reinforced by analogy with other artistic traditions. But it is not truly what the Greeks made, or what they met with.

Agamemnon will be the first Greek play at Oxford in many years to use masks. Given the centrality and importance of the mask in Greek theatre, an astonishingly small number of productions have attempted their use, the most recent of which was *Hippolytus* of 1955, directed in translation by Michael Elliot. (Cambridge's record is slightly better, as it is less than two decades since Dictynna Hood's masked *Bacchae* of 1989.)

Our masks have been specially designed by Helen Damon, an assistant at the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, with the Classical model in mind, but also with a view to facilitating a bond between actor and mask: each protagonist's mask has been tailored to fit the face of the actor, and designed with reference to his or her appearance. Helen's designs will be moulded, cast, and painted by Vicki Hallam, who began her career as a mask-maker as an assistant to Jocelyn Herbert on the 1981 production of the *Oresteia* directed by Sir Peter Hall at the National Theatre.

Although unusual nowadays, the masks, music, and dance we use in *Agamemnon* should not direct attention away from the words. Throughout the play the role of rhythm, pace, gesture, and musical accompaniment is to support the text and elucidate its meaning. To this end, the choral odes have been carefully

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* will be performed in the original Ancient Greek at the Oxford Playhouse from 15 to 18 October, 2008. For information about show times, pre- and post-show talks, special events for schools, or to book tickets please visit http://www.oxfordgreekplay.com.

scored and choreographed to underscore Aeschylus' beautiful, supremely difficult poetry. The aim is that the varied modes of performance in our *Agamemnon* will draw viewers in and 'enlarge their sensibilities', which, as Dr Johnson said, is the ultimate aim of any work of art.

Claire Catenaccio is the director who has to take all the difficult decisions about how to cope with the Chorus, the masks, and the sheer fury of Agamemnon.